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ABSTRACT

Although most national and regional statistics show that violent crimes have been declining, there is a widespread misperception among the public that such crimes are increasing. The Perception and Experience of Violent Crime survey, based on research on actual rates and perceptions of crime, was administered to subjects enrolled in a college psychology course. The study attempted to determine if students' false perceptions were the result of their personal experiences or whether they were from indirect, virtual media experiences. The data revealed misperceptions of violent crime rates in the U.S. among college students. The majority (82%) of the respondents perceived crime as out of control. Despite their general sense that crime is rampant, students do not seem to see their own environment as particularly dangerous. While widespread dissemination of accurate information about violent crime rates might improve young adults' knowledge, it is also possible that selective attention might distort their response to such educational efforts. Consideration must be given to the fact that educational efforts might be counterproductive. (Contains 62 references.) (JDM)

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Problems in Education about Violence: Factors Affecting the Perceived Increase in Violent Crime

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Abstract

Although most national and regional statistics show that violent crimes (murder, non negligent manslaughter, aggravated assault, robbery, and forcible rape) in the U.S. have been declining, there is a widespread misperception among the public that such crimes are increasing. There also appears to be an apparent public appetite for exaggerated portrayals of violence, fueling media reports, which often tend to reinforce rather than to challenge myths. Various authors have asserted that the media promulgates fear of crime by its sensationalized and statistically distorted coverage (Armstong, 1999; Eitzen, 1995).

A survey (Perception and Experience of Violent Crime) was created based on previous research on actual crime rates and perceptions of crime. This self-report measure was administered to subjects who were enrolled in various Ursinus psychology classes during the spring semester of 2001. The data was collected and various statistical analyses were performed using SPSS for Windows.

This research attempted to determine if these false perceptions are the result of subjects' direct, actual personal experiences or their indirect, virtual media experiences. This study may serve to inform the public about how they may be misguided by beliefs based on information gleaned from newspaper and magazine articles, television, films, and the Internet. In addition, this project examined the thesis that overestimation of the risk of violence is associated with participants feeling more justified in being aggressors themselves and retaliating when threatened. This project also explored the irony that cultures that inspire paranoia may in fact become more dangerous, thereby justifying rampant paranoia.

The data revealed widespread misperceptions of violent crime rates in the U.S. among college students. The majority (82%) of the respondents perceived crime as out of control. The young adults reported an exaggerated view of the risks of murder, non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, and robbery. The overwhelming majority overestimated the percentage of violent crimes that are committed involving a weapon. Very few participants recognized that most violent crimes are committed by people familiar to the victim. The majority of respondents also have an exaggerated perception of how much violent crime occurs between midnight and 6 a.m. In contrast, the participants tended to underestimate the rates of aggravated assault. The majority of respondents also underestimated the amount of crime occurring during the day. Statistics reveal that more than half of crimes committed actually occur during the day (between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m.).

Despite their general sense that crime is rampant, they do not seem to see their own immediate environment as particularly dangerous. A mere 2% of the sample believes that they live in an unsafe neighborhood, and only 6% feel very unsafe walking in their neighborhood at night.

While widespread dissemination of more accurate information about violent crime rates might improve young adults' knowledge, it is also possible that selective attention might distort this audience's response to such educational efforts. If the educational intervention heightens the salience of the message's threatening component, more coverage of the violent crime issue may simply exacerbate the already exaggerated perceptions of risk. Consequently, educational efforts here might inadvertently backfire.

Introduction

The FBI revealed in a report released on May 7, 2000, that for the eighth consecutive year there was a nationwide decrease in the rate of serious crimes reported to police (Sniffen, 2000). The 7% decline from the previous year contributed to the "longest-running decline in crime on record." The report indicated "all seven major types of crime were down in each region of the nation, and in suburbs, rural areas, and in cities of all sizes." Murder and robbery diminished by 8% each, and rape and assault each declined by 7%.

On August 27, 2000, the Justice Department issued a report stating that violent crime had dropped ten percent in the preceding year. This statistic represented "the third time in less than a decade that the crime rate has fallen so much" (Slevin, 2000). In 1999, 7.3 million people, or approximately "33 of every 1,000 U.S. residents endured a violent attack. That represents a decline of 34 percent since 1993, to its lowest level since the department began its study in 1973" (Slevin, 2000). Rapes decreased 40% since 1993, robbery with injury decreased 38.5%, and threats with a weapon decreased 45.3%.

Experts claim that there is no single explanation for the decline, but many believe the dissipating crack epidemic is a major factor. Criminologists also believe that a significant demographic shift, specifically, a recent drop in the number of young people who have traditionally committed a disproportionate number of crimes, may be another factor contributing to the decrease in the rate of violent crime. Other factors may include the good economy, tougher prison sentences, stricter gun laws, more police, and smarter police strategies (*U.S. News & World Report*, 1999).

Despite this encouraging evidence, it seems that most Americans continue to view the problem of violent crime as escalating out of control. This misperception may be fueled by a variety of factors. Those with a history of actual experience of being victimized by violent criminals might be sensitized and therefore perceive higher rates of violence around them. Former victims of crime experience flashbacks and have exaggerated fear responses to ambiguous situations (Rathus, 1993).

Alternatively, the public may maintain an exaggerated view of crime in large measure due to their virtual exposure to violence via news media reportage. Although the rate of violent crime has decreased, the media bombards society with messages to the contrary. A widespread news media slogan is, "If it bleeds, it leads." In 1993, the three major TV networks doubled their coverage of crime stories and tripled their coverage of murders. According to the Associated Press, "'the rate of crime stories [in 1996] was triple that in the early '90s' – an alarming redirection – and, worse, 'news about homicides jumped more than 700 percent'" (Medved & Medved, 1998). "This distortion of reality results, of course, in a general perception that we are in the midst of a crime wave" (Eitzen, 1995).

According to members of a monitoring group who analyzed tapes of local evening news programs that aired the same day on 100 television stations in 35 states, "stations use sensation and tabloid journalism to manipulate and condition viewers…crime stories, mainly murder, dominate half the newscasts" (Cohen & Solomon, 1995).

Researcher John McManus (as cited in Cohen & Solomon, 1995) published an account in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, which revealed that 18 of 32 stories analyzed on the news were inaccurate or misleading. McManus also discovered that

stations made no effort to correct obvious omissions (Cohen & Solomon, 1995). He discovered a pattern to the mis-coverage. "There is an economic logic to these distortions and inaccuracies. All but one…were likely to increase the story's appeal, help cut down the cost of reporting, or oversimplify a story so it could be told in two minutes" (Cohen & Solomon, 1995). Public interest clearly takes a back seat to the industry's emphasis on making profits. The print media are equally culpable in this regard. Brad J. Bushman and Craig A. Anderson challenged a "factually incorrect article" that appeared in *Newsweek* in 1995. The *Newsweek* article asserted that there was no concrete evidence that "exposure to media violence increases aggression" (Leland, 1995). Their rebuttal to the article, replete with factual evidence, was not published because the magazine replied that they were not interested in publishing the letter. Bushman and Anderson lament, "In an age of multinational, multimedia mega-corporations, perhaps it should not be surprising that truth in journalism has been forced to the back of the bus, as if it is not as important or valuable as profits or a good story" (Bushman & Anderson, 2001).

"The media's tendency to sensationalize crime stories, exploit human drama, and bring the news 'home' to the viewer or reader" creates the feeling that crime is coming into their homes (Armstrong, 1999). Barry Glassner, a professor at the University of Southern California and author of *The Culture of Fear* (1999), believes that although incidents such as the Columbine shooting are very serious, the replayed images of the event give the impression that it is still with us and that this type of incident happens more often than it does.

S.G. Lanes, in a 1996 article for *The Horn Book Magazine,* conveys that although our country is at peace, "American society has come to accept a terrifying level of

violence as a familiar, everyday part of our lives. All of us have become accustomed to years of on-the-spot, real-life news coverage of carnage all over the world. The instant availability of close-up footage of slaughtered civilians, disfigured soldiers, crazed gunman, and innocent bystanders has led to our developing a self-protective shield of numbness. Because all too often people are rendered helpless in this battle, they have become immune to normal human reaction of disgust and outrage" (Lanes, 1996).

The power of the media to influence children was emphasized in a 1999 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation. Of particular note was the fact that the "average child between eight and eighteen years old spent six hours and forty-three minutes each day with television, video or computer games, popular music, or other media, more time than they spent in school, with parents, or engaged in any activity other than sleep. Having more contact time with children and adolescents, media has the potential to replace parents, teachers, and peers as educators, role models, and the primary source of information about the world and how one behaves in it" (Rich & Bar-on, 2001).

Given individuals' increasing reliance on media portrayals of the world, media misinformation has a disturbing potential to warp conceptualizations of risk and vulnerability to violent crime. To the extent that the media exaggerates the rate of violence in order to attract a large audience, both children and adults might be expected to report inaccurately high rates of violent crime.

In addition, social scientists have long worried about the possibility that ceaseless exposure to media images of violence will increase at least some children's likelihood of behaving violently themselves. In order to buttress their position, since levels of media violence have continued to rise, it is important for such researchers to highlight evidence

of parallel increases in actual rates of violent crimes. Although there are many indicators that the problem of violent crime has stabilized in recent years, if comparisons are drawn with other industrialized countries, the U.S. can be portrayed as having a very serious violent crime problem.

"The violent crime rate [in the United States] is down 20% in the last decade, but it is still higher than the rest of the industrialized world" (G.W. Bush, *The Newshour* with Jim Lehrer, PBS, May 14, 2001). "Among industrialized countries, the United States is one of the most violent" (Zimring & Hawkins, 1997). This selective type of comparative reporting may help to account for the apparent incongruence between actual statistics on rates of violent crime and public perceptions of violence.

Pernicious effects of media violence on children

Although at first glance it might seem that the reduced rates of certain violent crimes challenge the assumption that media exposure to violence is teaching violent behaviors to children, it is important to keep in mind that the number of children in the age groups most prone to violence have decreased in recent decades. It may be that if the problem of violence is considered on a "per child" basis, there is evidence of harm attributable to media influences. The dangerous effects of the media may not be manifested in current crime rates because this harm is being masked by temporary demographic trends. In fact, there is fairly compelling evidence that at least a subpopulation of children model the violent behavior they see glamorized on television, in films, and in video games. "Numerous studies have produced correlations and other statistical associations between media violence and aggression in children. Explanations include (1)*sanitization and desensitization* – after repeated exposure to violence, kids get

used to witnessing cruelty and mayhem and grow less loath to use it; (2)*identification* – kids imitate whatever they see on-screen; (3)*arousal* – kids are unhealthily stimulated by media violence and perceive it as thrilling and something to be tried; and (4)*positive reinforcement* – kids learn from TV and the movies that violence is rewarded" (Kellerman, 1999).

The entertainment industry continues to saturate the culture with depictions of violence in movies, TV programs, computer games, and the Internet. "A 1994 study by the Center for Media and Popular Culture (as cited in Allen, 2001) reports an average of 15 violent acts being televised per channel per hour between 6 A.M. and midnight, an increase of 41 percent in only four years. In his 1999 national address on media violence after the student massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, President Clinton reported that 'by the time the typical American child reaches the age of eighteen, he or she has seen 200,000 dramatized acts of violence and 40,000 dramatized murders.'" (Allen, 2001) "Almost two-thirds of prime-time fictional dramas involve violence. Even Saturday morning cartoon shows such as 'X-Men' and 'Mighty Morphin Power Rangers,' designed specifically for children, contain lengthy sequences of aggression" (Huston et al., 1992; Gabrikant, 1996 as cited in Feldman, 1998).

Scott Stossel, in an article for the *Atlantic Monthly* (May, 1997), was surprised to discover that "prime time television presents a world in which crime rates are a hundred times worse" than the actual rate. George Gerbner discusses the significance of the distorted amount of television violence. He believes that the pure quantity of violence on television reinforces "the idea that aggressive behavior is normal" (Gerbner, 1996). The mind of the viewer becomes "'militarized,'" and this leads to the "'Mean World

Syndrome'" (Gerbner, 1996). "Because television depicts the world as worse than it is (at least for white suburbanites), [they] become fearful and anxious – and more willing to depend on authorities, strong measures, gated communities, and other proto-police-state accoutrements" (Gerbner, 1996). "'Growing up in a violence-laden culture breeds aggressiveness in some and desensitization, insecurity, mistrust, and anger in most. Punitive and vindictive action against dark forces in a mean world is made to look appealing, especially when presented as quick, decisive, and enhancing our sense of control and security" (Gerbner, 1996).

Studies have shown correlations between the amount of television viewed and general fearfulness about the world. People who watch television frequently view the world as more dangerous than those who watch infrequently. "Heavy viewers tend to favor more law-and-order measures: capital punishment, three-strikes prison sentencing, the building of new prisons," etc. (Gerbner, 1996).

In an article published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* on January 3, 2001, writer M. Mitka reports that Dr. Michael Rich, MD, director of Video Intervention/Prevention Assessment at Children's Hospital, Boston, and Harvard Medical School, revealed during a summit in Washington, D.C. that for children and adolescents in the U.S., violence is the most prevalent health risk. Each year 150,000 adolescents are arrested for violent crimes, while 300,000 are seriously assaulted, and 3,500 more are murdered. Rich cited research revealing that the greatest factor contributing to violent behavior is previous exposure to violence.

Researchers working with incarcerated juvenile delinquents suffering from post traumatic stress disorder recognize that the disorder paves a "pathway for the

perpetuation of violence" (Widom, 1995). One way this happens is through "inappropriate reactions resulting in delinquent acts (thinking you are being attacked, when someone is just running toward you)", and another is the reliving of the traumatic event or events, whereby "the PTSD sequences are engraved and continuously acted out" (Steiner, Garcia & Matthews, 1997).

Delinquent acts in particular "may be a direct or indirect reflection of past victimization" (Ryan et al., 1996). Many of the PTSD positive subjects in this study of juvenile delinquents reported having been involved in "intrafamilial violence including abuse, murder, and grave injury (27%) " or having witnessed violent events in their community (21%). Findings in the study indicated that the "PTSD- positive delinquents were clearly the most troubled in terms of impulse control and control of aggression. Such a finding has implications for recidivism" (Steiner, Garcia &Matthews, 1997). "Reduced restraint in the presence of inappropriate and high reactivity induced by PTSD fits well with the patterns of 'reactive violence' described by Dodge (1992) and so common in juveniles" (Steiner, Garcia & Matthews, 1997). The report also discusses the connection between trauma and specific criminal behavior. In one study, seventy-five percent of the adolescents who committed sexual assault had themselves been the young victims of sexual abuse by women (Steiner, Garcia & Matthews, 1997). These boys later victimized women in their crimes.

According to four major health groups (The American Medical Association, The American Academy of Pediatrics, The American Psychological Association, and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry), "the effects of violent media are measurable and long lasting" (Albiniak, 2000). Emotional desensitization toward

violence may result from the prolonged viewing of media violence. These four major public health organizations also believe that violent entertainment encourages children to be violent. Some consequences of exposure to violence are that children may: "1) Grow to see violence as an effective way to resolve conflicts, 2) Become desensitized to real-life violence, 3) Mistrust others because they fear violence, and 4) Become more violent adults" (Albiniak, 2000). "...Watching one violent TV show has little impact on the likelihood of a child becoming a habitual violent offender, but the empirical evidence now clearly shows that repeated exposure to violent media, for example, a couple of hours a day for 15 years, causes a serious increase in the likelihood of a person becoming a habitually aggressive person and occasionally a violent offender" (Huesmann, Moise, Podolski, & Eron, 2000).

Entertainer Steve Allen, in his book, *Vulgarians at the Gate* (2001), asserts that "there is a growing public appreciation of the link between our excessively violent and degrading entertainment and the horrifying new crimes we see emerging among our young: school children gunning down teachers and fellow students en masse, killing sprees inspired by violent films, and teenagers murdering their babies only to return to dance at the prom." In an article for the *Saturday Evening Post* (1999), Dave Grossman noted that, tragically, media-inspired copycat crimes are now a fact of life. Grossman admits that society needs to be informed about these crimes, but that when the images of young killers are broadcast on TV, the youthful offenders become role models.

A study by M.A. Hepburn (1995) revealed that watching violent TV increased violent and aggressive tendencies in viewers and caused them to identify with violent characters. In addition "viewers are most likely to imitate aggressive models in the mass

media when violence is rewarded or goes unpunished" (National Television Violence Study, 1996, 1997). "The barrage of violence [portrayed in the media] may lead viewers to conclude that if others can behave aggressively without being caught and punished, then it is all right for them to behave aggressively too" (Bandura, 1973). Gerbner noted that "'happy violence appears both in cartoons and in action movies like True Lies and Die Hard, wherein all problems can be solved by violence and violence has no serious consequences. Movies, it should be noted, are an important part of the constant violent fare on television and in the culture in general. They must become more and more graphic if they are to penetrate our violence-hardened sensibilities'" (Gerbner, 1996). Gerbner adds that the body count always increases in action sequels.

"Scripting" and "priming" are two ways in which viewing violent media may lead to aggressive behavior. Huesmann (1986) purported that children learn aggressive scripts for social behavior by viewing violence. "Once a script has been stored in memory, it may be retrieved at some later time as a guide for behavior, such as in situations of interpersonal conflict that closely resemble conflicts seen in the media presentation. The person first selects a script to represent the situation and then assumes a role in the script" (Bushman, 1998). "Individuals may come to see aggression as a legitimate response within the context of a particular situation" (Huesmann, 1986). Research by Berkowitz (1984) has suggested that "the aggressive ideas suggested by a violent movie can prime other semantically related thoughts, heightening the chances that viewers will have other aggressive ideas in this period." Observing violence can give rise to aggressive ideation and emotions connected with violence, thereby promoting aggressive actions (Bushman, 1998). Many studies have demonstrated that priming by aggressive stimuli increases

aggressive behavior (Berkowitz & Le Page, 1967; Carver et al., 1983, Experiment 2: Leyens & Dunand, 1991). "Scenes of violence in the mass media prime aggressive constructs in memory, making them more accessible to viewers" (Bushman, 1998). If television and other media were to reduce the violent content of programming, some contend that viewers' aggressive behavior could be reduced (Feldman, 1998).

Television programs in the United States are considered the most violent among those found in all of the advanced, industrialized nations. Gerbner theorizes that the reason for this is to enhance exports of American films and programs to the global market. "Violence travels well. ...[It's] cheap to produce, easy to distribute – violence is the surest road to profit" (Gerbner, 1996).

Since their inception in the late '70s, video games have increased in popularity and currently generate over $10 billion in annual sales. As their popularity has grown, so has the violence in their themes. Eighty percent of today's most popular video games contain violence, and twenty percent of those include violence against women (Vessey & Lee, 2000). Children regard playing video games as socially desirable. The violent content appeals to children of both sexes. "In general, boys prefer games with sports and action violence, while girls prefer fantasy violence. Boys also play video games far more frequently than girls" (Vessey & Lee, 2000).

Research indicates that there is a connection between playing video games and subsequent aggression. A number of studies show that "playing violent video games resulted in an increase in short-term aggressive behaviors, with children tending to imitate those behaviors portrayed in the theme of the game, such as martial arts master or jungle hero" (Vessey & Lee, 2000). A study by Anderson & Dill suggests a cognitive

effect of playing violent video games. "Learning and repeatedly practicing aggressive situations may alter children's basic personality structures, leading to more hostile thoughts and untoward changes in social interactions" (Vessey & Lee, 2000).

"Certain types of violent video games . . . may be as effective in training killers as flight simulators are in training pilots" (Vessey & Lee, 2000). "With the advent of interactive point and shoot arcade and video games there is a significant concern that society is aping military conditioning but without the vital safeguard of discipline" (Garbarino, 1999). Military psychologist David Grossman (1999) explained that "by exposing our kids [to these types of games], we are systematically training them to ignore their inhibition against shooting a fellow human, an inhibition that may be the last line of defense against lethal youth violence – for even a child who wants to shoot someone may be unable to do so if this normal inhibition is still in place" (Garbarino, 1999).

After the Columbine High School shootings in 1999, President Clinton noted that over 300 studies indicate that vulnerable children have difficulty recognizing the boundary between "fantasy and reality violence." Those desensitized to violence are more capable of performing it themselves (Vessey & Lee, 2000). A hearing of the Senate Commerce Committee focused on the video game industry after the Columbine massacre, because the two teen perpetrators were "obsessive players of the ultra-violent video game 'Doom'" (Holland, 1999). Stephen Kent, a reporter for the *Seattle Times*, wrote that children are exposed to a significantly greater quantity of violence from games like "Doom," "War Craft II," and "Quake," than they are from movies or television (Medved & Medved, 1998). The creator of the game "Doom," John Romero, affirms, "'when you can invoke fear in people, whether it's through satanic imagery or dark passageways with

monsters growling, that's better feedback for the player'" (Medved & Medved, 1998). Although this may be the case, a cause for concern is the fact that these games are marketed to a target audience of impressionable children. Senators Orrin Hatch of Utah and Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut testified at a Senate hearing on May 4, 1999, that they "have clear evidence that violent video games, teen-sploitation/slasher films, and rap and 'shock rock' recordings are created for and marketed to a teen audience, despite rating systems that are supposed to discourage sales to minors" (Holland, 1999).

The recording industry is another culprit in advocating violence via its artists and their products. In *Vulgarians at the Gate*, Steve Allen condemns the lyrics and the exhortations of rappers like the Geto Boys, 2 Live Crew, Tupac Shakur, Eminem, and Ice-T. He declares, "Not only are the blunt terms shocking enough, in the context of popular music heard on records, CDs and tapes, and on the radio, but the messages conveyed are even more chilling. Violent rape and outright murder, for example, are not only described but condoned, recommended, glamorized" (Allen, 2001). The executives of the recording industry do not make any apologies for the material that they sell. In fact, "'if sex and violence sell, their line goes, then sexual violence sells the most'" (Allen, 2001).

There can be little doubt about the connection between the lyrics of some rap songs and their influence upon crimes committed. In June 2000, fifty-three women were assaulted in Central Park in New York by groups of men who were singing misogynistic lyrics. Alisa Valdes-Rodriquez, a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, commented that, "The idiots who ripped the clothes off the women in Central Park were raised on gangsta rap and aggrorock. It did not *reflect* their worldview; it *formed* it" (Allen, 2001).

At an annual spring break party in Atlanta, men chanted women-hating lyrics while attacking women. At the 1999 Woodstock concert, a similar scene was witnessed as men rapped while they raped women. New York papers reported that a young woman had been raped, in a public swimming pool, by a group of young men who chanted the lyrics to another popular song that degraded women (Allen, 2001).

Compounding these problems further are new communication channels. The Internet has evolved into another potentially dangerous medium for violence. Hate groups have abounded on the web. FBI Special Agent Raymond A. Franklin compiled "The Hate Directory," which lists over 400 web addresses for numerous hate groups and their affiliates. He also has complied the "Directory of groups combating Hate on the Net," which, by comparison, lists only 15 web addresses (Franklin, 2000). The Internet has enhanced the ability of these organizations to recruit, to spread false information, and to advocate violence. "Poisoning the Web: Hatred Online," a special report by the Anti-Defamation League, declares, "The hate we see on the Internet today is more pervasive, more virulent, more insidious, and more threatening than anything extremists of past decades could have imagined" (Anti-Defamation League [ADL], 2001).

Chief among the hate organizations is the National Alliance, whose founder, William Pierce, wrote the novel *The Turner Diaries*. "Many extremists regard *The Turner Diaries* as an explicit terrorism manual, and the novel is believed to have inspired several major acts of violence, including the April 1995 Oklahoma City bombing" (ADL, 2001). Other violent crimes, such as murder, bombing, and robberies, have been attributed to the National Alliance or to its propaganda. Its membership has more than doubled since 1992, largely due to its introduction online. The Ku Klux Klan, a

proponent of violence, has also realized dramatic growth in membership since it has utilized the web "to revitalize [its] movement and attract a new cadre of supporters and activists" (ADL, 2001).

The Internet hosts many websites that focus upon the depiction of violent scenes. These sites not only horrify, but they also desensitize people to the effects of violence. The sites are a compilation of gore and guts that are at times perverse. Their fare includes tasteless depictions of death and injury. The content posted on these sites is accessible to adults and children alike. Those who are predisposed to acting aggressively seek out such sites, which in turn fuels their aggression, propagating the cycle of violence (Huesmann, Lagerspetz & Eron, 1984; Bushman, 1995).

The Internet is also a recipe book for bomb making. Senator Dianne Feinstein of California referred to a terrorist handbook on the Internet that provided instructions for booby trapping with explosives such commonplace items as toilet paper rolls and light bulbs (*Editor & Publisher*, 1995). The formula for the nerve gas sarin can be obtained at a U.S. Army website. Sarin was the poison gas released in the Tokyo subway attack. Although terrorist materials and formulas for bomb making have been available in print, the web access to this material makes the information more immediately available to a widespread audience.

The web encourages and reinforces those so inclined to commit acts of violence. It has become all too easy for people, especially youth, to become members of negative peer groups without even leaving their homes (Garbarino, 1999).

There seems to be a widespread perception that the Internet has become a resource for those willing to commit violence, facilitating increasingly lethal acts. This

belief may strengthen individuals' convictions that crime is raging out of control, whether or not that in fact is true. Unfortunately, people who believe their world to be highly dangerous are more likely to attend to stimuli in a manner that promotes the detection of threats. This selective attention thereby alters perception in a way that reinforces the original belief. In this way, people's fears and suspicions can spiral upward. Those who believe their world to be full of violent predators generally feel more justified in using violent solutions themselves. If violence is over detected in others, one's own aggression can be rationalized as retaliatory. Ironically, this paranoid stance and resultant "retaliatory" aggression typically elicits violence from others, thereby validating the original paranoid attitude.

In some instances, people act out anticipatory aggression if they reason that they are likely to be the victims of a future attack (Greenwell & Dengerink, 1993; Donnerstein & Donnerstein, 1977). Such behavior, therefore, is a result of forethought and not simply an automatic response when incited by others (Feldman, 1998). "Clearly, members of our society take seriously the Biblical dictum, 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' – even if the eye and the tooth have not yet been harmed" (Feldman, 1998).

Other factors, taken separately or in combination, also motivate people to behave aggressively. "As people become less sensitive to the meaning and consequences of aggression, they may feel more free to act aggressively themselves" (Feldman, 1998). "Physical aggression often begets a physical response. People seem to think that it is permissible to reciprocate aggression that is directed toward them" (Dengerink & Covey, 1983). "If aggression is seen as justified, it is more likely to be modeled" (Berkowitz & Powers, 1979).

Current Investigation

An assessment of the accuracy of the public's perception of violent crime requires confidence in an objective measure of this phenomenon. In this investigation, federal crime statistics have been adopted as the premier means of gauging actual rates of violence. However, just as the Internet is both a blessing and a curse, so too can be statistics. When accepted carte blanche and viewed with an indiscriminate eye, statistics often obfuscate rather than clarify, and they tend to amplify inaccurate perceptions. Joel Best underscores this point in an article entitled, "Telling the truth about damned lies and statistics," which appeared in the May 2001, issue of *The Chronicle Review*. He offers as an example a statistic from the prospectus of a graduate student. The statistic claims that "every year since 1950, the number of American children gunned down has doubled." Taken at its word, this would mean that by 1995, the year of publication of the original article from which the student had quoted, the annual number of victims would have been 35 trillion, well over the total human population of 110 billion people throughout history. Best's point was that people rarely ask questions when they encounter a misinterpreted statistic.

He added, "Most of the time, most people simply accept statistics without question." Best contends that bad statistics pose a serious threat because they have the ability to stir up public outrage or fear. They may distort one's understanding of the world and as a result, they may cause one to make poor decisions. There exists a need for members of the public to become better judges of the numbers encountered and to think critically about statistics. Good statistics are necessary in order to talk sensibly about social problems. It is important to consider statistics thoughtfully, not merely to accept

them at face value, especially because the media use statistics to make their reporting more dramatic and more convincing.

Hypotheses

This study will investigate general beliefs about violent crime, and the influence of both actual and virtual experiences on these beliefs. It will also explore the relationship between actual and virtual experience on the likelihood of endorsing retaliatory responses to threatening situations.

Method

The participants in this study were students from a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania with an enrollment of 1,200 students. There were a total of 86 participants; 31 were male, and 55 were female. The mean age of the subjects was 19.37 years.

Seventy-two of the participants were white. Six were African American, three were Asian American, one was Indian, and two of the respondents reported that they were "other."

Ten of the subjects said they live in a rural area. Forty-four of the subjects said they live in the suburbs. Twenty of the subjects said they live in a small town. Twelve of the subjects said they live in a large city.

In order to assess accuracy of knowledge about violent crime, participants were given 10 objective items based on factual information contained in the 2000 U.S. Census Report (see Appendix A). Items selected for the Perceived General Violence, the Perceived Personal Risk, and the Perceived Campus Violence scales were based on previous research by DeBecker (1997), Glassner (1999), The Justice Department (2000),

and Prothrow-Stith (1991). The Perceived General Violence Scale consisted of eight 4-point Likert format items (1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=strongly agree). Questions on the Perceived General Violence Scale focused upon the perceived extent of violent crime and the perceived demographics of perpetrators ("Violent crime is out of control in this country", "Violence by urban youth has increased"). The Perceived Personal Risk Scale consisted of seven 4-point Likert format items (1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=strongly agree) and assessed the extent to which subjects felt safe or worried about becoming potential victims ("I feel safe walking in my neighborhood during the day", "I frequently worry about being physically attacked"). The Perceived Campus Violence Scale consisted of seven 4-point Likert format items (1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=strongly agree) assessing subjects' level of comfort regarding safety in specific locations on campus ("I feel safe walking on campus during daylight hours", "I feel safe using campus parking lots at night").

The Actual Experience Scale was based on responses to 37 "yes" or "no" questions pertaining to the participant's direct experience with violent crime. For example, questions included whether the respondent or the respondent's family members, friends, or acquaintances had been the victim of aggravated assault, murder, non negligent manslaughter, or forcible rape. Subjects were also asked if they had ever witnessed a violent crime. Other questions asked whether or not the respondent had ever been attacked or threatened, and which, if any, weapons were used against them.

The Virtual Experience measure consisted of 12-items. These items assessed the subjects' amount of exposure to violent content offered via various media, including television, newspapers and magazines, books, and the Internet.

The Prevention Investment Scale was based on 13 relevant attitudinal and behavioral items. The two attitudinal items were expressed in 4-point Likert format (1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=strongly agree). For example, one of these questions inquired whether the respondent would ever consider purchasing a gun. The other 11 items on the Prevention Investment Scale were behavioral items asking about specific pro-active measures that the subject takes in order to prevent becoming a victim ("stay in well lit areas", "lock doors/windows", "have training in self defense", "carry mace or pepper spray"). Participants were required to answer "yes" or "no" when responding to these items.

Attitudes about the media's role in shaping attitudes toward violence were assessed through ten author-devised, 4-point Likert format items (1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=strongly agree). These 10 questions pertain to the assumed influence of several types of violent media experiences, including TV, newspaper and magazine articles, movies, music, video games, and the Internet.

Attitudes about reactions to threatening situations were assessed through an author-devised 4-item scale, the Hypothetical Situation Scale. Four hypothetical situations were posed and the subjects indicated if they would respond in a passive, assertive or an aggressive manner (for example, "If someone demanded you to surrender your purse or wallet, would you: drop it and run [passive], keep it and run [passive], verbally resist [assertive], or physically resist [aggressive]".

Results

Directionally adjusted item values were totaled for each participant, yielding summary scores on the Perceived General Violence, the Perceived Personal Risk, and the Perceived Campus Violence scales. Scores were similarly calculated for the Actual Experience and Virtual Experience measures.

Concern about prevention was assessed by totaling the 14 relevant behavioral and attitudinal items. Attitudes about the media's role in shaping attitudes toward violence were assessed by totaling the 15 Perceived Media Role items.

Knowledge of Violent Crime

Responses to the individual objective knowledge items were scored for accuracy. The majority of respondents overestimated the prevalence of murder (81%) and forcible rape (71%). While in actuality for every 100,000 U.S. citizens fewer than 10 experience murder or non negligent manslaughter each year, half of the mistaken participants believed that 35 out of 100,000 experience murder annually, and the other half of the mistaken participants believed that the rate was over 165 per 100,000. In the case of estimates regarding rape, only 24% of the respondents correctly estimated that 35 out of 100,000 people are the victims of forcible rape each year. The majority (71%) of the respondents mistakenly overestimated the rate as being over 165 per 100,000.

Half of the sample overestimated the prevalence of robbery. In actuality, only 165 per 100,000 individuals experience robberies yearly. Half of the sample wrongly estimated the rate of robbery to be 360 per 100,000 yearly. Only 17% of the respondents underestimated the occurrence of robbery, but it is important to note that they extremely

underestimated the rate to be less than 35 per 100,000 yearly. Half (51%)of respondents underestimated the occurrence of aggravated assault. The actual rate of this type of crime was more than twice what these subjects believed.

The large majority (87%) of participants exaggerated the risk of their being victimized by a stranger in a violent encounter. Only 13% recognized that most violent crimes are committed by people familiar to the victim. The majority had an exaggerated perception of the risk of being a victim of violent crime at or near a person's home (80%) or in a parking lot or garage (76%).

The majority (73%) underestimated the amount of crime occurring during the day (6 a.m. to 6 p.m.). Statistics reveal that more than half of crimes committed occur during the day (between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m.). The majority (84%) of respondents have an exaggerated perception of how much violent crime occurs between midnight and 6 a.m. Sixty-five percent of the sample wrongly believed that the majority of violent crimes are committed during these hours. The overwhelming majority (98%) overestimated the percentage of violent crimes that are committed involving a weapon. In 75 % of all violent crimes, no weapons are present.

Perceived General Violence

Responses to the eight questions on The Perceived General Violence Scale revealed that the overwhelming majority (82%) of respondents agreed with the statement, "Violent crime is out of control in this country." Eighteen percent of the respondents somewhat disagreed, while none of the respondents strongly disagreed with this statement.

Less than half (41%) of the sample correctly recognized that statistics have shown a decrease in violent crime in recent years. Fifty percent of the respondents somewhat disagreed, while 9% strongly disagreed with this statement.

Only 21% of the sample correctly strongly agreed with the statement, "Violence by urban youth has increased." Almost one-quarter (24%) of the sample incorrectly disagreed with this statement. Only 28% of the participants correctly responded by strongly agreeing with the statement, "Violence by small town and rural youth has increased." Fifty-one percent of the respondents somewhat agreed, while 21% of the respondents somewhat disagreed with this statement.

Almost half (45%) of the sample incorrectly agreed with the statement, "Homicide is one of the top three leading causes of death in America." Thirty-seven percent somewhat disagreed, while 18% of the participants correctly responded by strongly disagreeing with this statement.

Slightly more than one-quarter (27%) of the sample responded correctly by strongly disagreeing with the statement, "Youth homicide rates have declined over the past 30 years." Fifty-six percent of the respondents somewhat disagreed, while 17% responded incorrectly by agreeing with this statement.

Forty-five percent of the sample agreed with the statement, "A increase in the number of law enforcement officers is an indication that crime is on the rise." Forty-two percent somewhat disagreed, while 13% strongly disagreed with this statement.

More than three-quarters of the participants correctly responded by disagreeing with the statement, "Violent urban legends are credible." Almost one-quarter (23%) incorrectly agreed with this statement.

Perceived Personal Risk

Responses to the seven questions on the Personal Risk Scale revealed that 61% of the respondents strongly disagreed with the statement, "I live in an unsafe neighborhood." Only 2% of the respondents strongly agreed that they live in an unsafe neighborhood.

Only 2% of the sample strongly agreed with the statement, "I feel vulnerable to violent crime." Eighty percent of the respondents disagreed with the statement, "I frequently worry about being physically attacked." Therefore, it is ironic that almost half (42%) of the sample believed that they are likely to be the victim of violent crime at some point in their lives.

Three-quarters of the sample strongly agreed with the statement, "I feel safe walking in my neighborhood during the day." Twenty-two percent somewhat agreed, while only 3% disagreed with this statement. Respondents admitted feeling less safe walking in their neighborhood at night than during the day, with less than half (48%) of the sample strongly agreeing with the statement, "I feel safe walking in my neighborhood at night." Thirty-three percent somewhat agreed, while 19% disagreed with this statement.

Only 2% of the respondents strongly believed that their personal experience is proof of America's serious crime problem. Ninety-two percent of the respondents disagreed that their personal experience is proof of America's serious crime problem. Responses to this statement suggest that the majority of this particular sample has had few actual experiences with violent crime.

Perceived Campus Violence

Responses to the seven questions on The Perceived Campus Violence Scale assessed subjects' level of comfort regarding safety in specific locations on campus. An overwhelming 93% of the respondents agreed with the statement, "I feel safe in my campus residence." Only one respondent reported that he/she strongly disagreed with this statement.

Ninety-nine percent of the respondents agreed with the statement, "I feel safe walking on campus during daylight hours." Although the majority of respondents (85%) reported that they agreed with the statement, "I feel safe walking on campus at night," it is apparent that fewer students feel safe walking on campus at night than they do during the day.

Ninety-six percent of the participants agreed with the statement, "I feel safe using campus parking lots during the day." Eighty-six percent of the participants agreed with the statement, "I feel safe using campus parking lots at night." Eleven percent of the respondents somewhat disagreed, and 3% strongly disagreed with this statement.

Forty-two percent of the sample strongly agreed with the statement, "I feel safe at campus parties." Thirty-four percent somewhat agreed, 19% somewhat disagreed, and 5% strongly disagreed with this statement.

Fifteen percent of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement, "I have faith in the ability of campus security and college authorities to protect me." Forty-four percent somewhat agreed, 17% somewhat disagreed, and almost one-quarter (24%) strongly disagreed with this statement.

Actual Experience Scale

In this sample, nine respondents reported direct experiences involving murder (there were reports of 2 murdered acquaintances, 4 murdered close friends, 4 murdered extended family members, and 1 murdered family member). One person reported witnessing a murder. Of these nine respondents, one respondent reported having 3 direct experiences with murder.

Eight respondents reported experiences with nonnegligent manslaughter. Three participants had acquaintances who had been the victim of nonnegligent manslaughter, 2 participants had close friends who had been the victim of nonnegligent manslaughter, 1 participant had an extended family member who had been the victim of nonnegligent manslaughter, and 2 participants had witnessed nonnegligent manslaughter.

Experiences involving forcible rape were reported by 31 respondents. Three participants had been victims of forcible rape themselves, 11 had acquaintances who had been forcibly raped, 13 had close friends who had been raped, and 4 had family members who had been raped.

A total of 38 participants revealed that they had experiences involving aggravated assault. Twelve participants revealed that they had direct experiences involving aggravated assault (9 participants had been victims of aggravated assault themselves, and 3 participants had witnessed aggravated assault). Six participants said they had an acquaintance who was the victim of aggravated assault, eight said they had a close friend who was the victim of aggravated assault, seven reported that they had a family member who was the victim of aggravated assault, and five participants responded that they had an extended family member who was the victim of aggravated assault.

The most common actual experience of violent crime reported by participants involved robbery. A total of 73 experiences of this crime were reported; 13 reported personal experience with robbery (either being robbed themselves or witnessing someone else's robbery), 34 had family or extended family member victims of robbery, 15 had close friend victims, and 11 had acquaintances who had been robbed.

Correlational analyses also showed that actual experience of violence was significantly positively associated with reaction in hypothetical situations ($r=.52$, $p<.01$, $n=78$). Those reporting greater actual experience were less likely to anticipate responding passively to threats.

A median split was used to create two groups based on actual experience of violence (low and high). Between-group t-tests indicated that those in the low group reported higher perceptions of general violence (low actual experience: $x=17.16$; s.d.= b2.70, $n=25$ versus high: $x=15.85$, s.d.= 2.59, $n=33$; $t=1.88$, $df=56.p<.01$). Between-group t-tests showed significant differences between these groups on prevention investment (low actual experience: $x=24.08$, s.d.=2.02, $n=26$ versus high actual experience: $x=21.79$, s.d.=2.91, $n=33$, $t=3.411$, $df=57$, $p<.01$) and reactions in hypothetical situations (low actual experience: $x=8.24$, s.d.=2.20, $n=25$ versus high actual experience: $x=10.06$, s.d.=2.97, $n=33$, $t=2.57$, $df=56$, $p<.01$).

Virtual Experience Scale

Almost one quarter (24%) of the respondents said that they watch crime shows on TV. Nearly two thirds (63%) of the respondents said they watch drama shows on TV. The majority (83%) of the respondents reported that they watch televised comedies, and a

minority report watching other types of programs (sports: 38%; cartoons: 43%; game shows: 26%; other: 26%).

Correlational analyses revealed that virtual experience of violence was not significantly associated with perceptions of either general or campus violence. Virtual exposure to violence was also unrelated to perceived personal risk and endorsement of retaliatory aggression in threatening situations.

A median split was used to create two groups based on virtual experience of violence (low and high). Between-group t-tests showed no significant differences between these groups on perceptions of campus violence, general violence, personal risk, and reactions in hypothetical situations.

Prevention Investment

Responses to the thirteen questions on The Prevention Investment Scale revealed some of the measures taken by respondents to prevent becoming the victim of violent crime. More than half (58%) of the respondents walk in groups at night. Two-thirds (66%) of the respondents stay in well-lit areas at night.

The overwhelming majority (90%) of respondents reported that they do not carry a weapon as a form of prevention from becoming a victim of violent crime. A mere 6% of the respondents carry mace or pepper spray.

Almost three-quarters (72%) of the respondents claimed that they tell people their plans before leaving, and 67% said that they never go to strange places alone. Less than half (45%) of the respondents reported that they carry a cell phone.

The overwhelming majority (81%) of participants lock their doors and windows as a form of prevention, while only 27% alarm their car or home. Twenty-seven percent

of this sample has training in self-defense. Only 2% of the sample reported that they take other precautionary measures in addition to the ones mentioned above in order to prevent themselves from becoming the victims of violent crime.

Perceived general violence was significantly positively correlated with prevention investment ($r=.40$, $p<.01$, $n=81$). Correlational analyses revealed that perceived campus violence was significantly negatively associated with prevention investment ($r=-.24$, $p<.05$, $n=56$). Prevention investment was found to be significantly negatively correlated with reactions in hypothetical situations ($r= -.31$, $p<.01$, $n=78$).

Perceived Role of the Media

Responses to the ten questions pertaining to the assumed influence of several types of violent media experiences revealed that over half (57%) of the respondents agreed with the statement, "Television makes people insensitive to violent crime." Twenty-two percent of the respondents somewhat disagreed, while 21% strongly disagreed with this statement. Fifty-five percent of the participants agreed with the statement, "Television news reports are proof of America's serious crime problem." Thirty-two percent of the participants somewhat disagreed, and 13% strongly disagreed.

Over half (51%) of the respondents agreed with the statement, "Newspaper and magazine articles are proof of America's serious crime problem." Thirty-eight percent of the respondents somewhat disagreed, and 10% strongly disagreed with this statement.

More than half (56%) of the respondents agreed with the statement, "Media reports validate fear of crime." Twenty-seven percent somewhat disagreed, and 17% strongly disagreed with this statement.

Less than half (45%) of the sample agreed with the statement, "Violence in movies makes people insensitive to crime." Thirty percent of the respondents somewhat disagreed, while 25% strongly disagreed with this statement.

Only eight percent of the participants strongly agreed with the statement, "Music CDs desensitize listeners to violent crime." Thirty percent of the participants somewhat agreed, while 62% disagreed with this statement.

Nearly half (42%) of the respondents agreed with the statement, "Graphic images on the Internet make some people behave violently." Twenty-eight percent of the respondents somewhat disagreed, and 30% strongly disagreed with this statement. Three-quarters of the respondents agreed with the statement, "The Internet provides details about how to commit violent crimes." Twenty-three percent of the respondents somewhat disagreed, and only 2% strongly disagreed with this statement.

The overwhelming majority (84%) of respondents agreed with the statement, "The majority of videogames involve some form of violence." Only 16% of the respondents disagreed with this statement. Only one-quarter of the respondents agreed with the statement, "Playing videogames increases the tendency of individuals to act violently." Thirty-eight percent of the respondents somewhat disagreed, and 37% strongly disagreed with this statement.

Responses to Hypothetical Situations

Reactions to a threat of violent crime were assessed by posing four hypothetical situations to the subjects. Responses to these hypothetical situations indicated whether the subjects would react in a passive, assertive or an aggressive manner.

It was found that when subjects were demanded to surrender their purses or wallets, three quarters (75%) of the respondents would react in a passive manner ("drop it and run" or "keep it and run"). Similarly, in the hypothetical situation of being followed to one's car, three quarters of the respondents (75%) would react in a passive, non-aggressive manner ("run to the car and lock the doors").

In the hypothetical case where the subject's boyfriend/girlfriend was threatened while in his/her presence, the majority (40%) of respondents would react assertively by confronting the person verbally. If a suspicious person had entered the subject's residence, more than three quarters (77%) of the respondents said they would react in a passive manner ("leave the premises" or "lock yourself in your room and call authorities").

Discussion

The data revealed widespread misperceptions of violent crime rates in the U.S. among college students. Although according to Glassner (1999), violent crime is not out of control in this country, the overwhelming majority (82%) of the respondents disagreed with this claim. The young adults surveyed have an exaggerated view of the risks of murder, non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, and robbery. The overwhelming majority overestimated the percentage of violent crimes that are committed involving a weapon. The large majority of participants exaggerated the risk of their being victimized by a stranger in a violent encounter. Very few participants recognized that most violent crimes are committed by people familiar to the victim. The majority of respondents have an exaggerated perception of the risk of being a victim of violent crime at or near a

person's home or in a parking lot or garage. The majority of respondents also have an exaggerated perception of how much violent crime occurs between midnight and 6 a.m. Sixty-five percent of the sample wrongly believes that the majority of violent crimes are committed during these hours.

In contrast, the participants tended to underestimate the rates of aggravated assault. The majority of respondents also underestimated the amount of crime occurring during the day. Statistics reveal that more than half of crimes committed actually occur during the day (between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m.).

These faulty beliefs are largely consistent with their impression that "crime is out of control in this country." Interestingly, despite their general sense that crime is rampant, they do not seem to see their own immediate environment as particularly dangerous. For example, a mere 2% of the sample believes that they live in an unsafe neighborhood, and only 6% feel very unsafe walking in their neighborhood at night.

While widespread dissemination of more accurate information about violent crime rates might improve young adults' knowledge, it is also possible that selective attention might distort this audience's response to such educational efforts. If learning the potential personal relevance of such information heightens the salience of the message's threatening component, more coverage of the violent crime issue may simply exacerbate the already exaggerated perceptions. As the result of selective attention, the audience may vividly remember the notion that various violent crimes occur, and forget the details regarding low prevalence. As a result, educational efforts here might inadvertently backfire.

Those with a high personal history with violent crime were significantly more likely to anticipate responding actively and even aggressively to future threatening encounters, as compared to those with low actual experience with violent crime. Surprisingly, those with more actual experience with violent crime invested less energy in taking preventative measures than those with fewer actual experiences with violent crime. Counterintuitively, it may be that merely imagining being a victim of violence has a stronger effect on motivation to avoid such encounters than actually having experienced an attack. Alternatively, this result may have been artifactual, owing to the relatively low rates of actual experience of violent crime among these respondents. Future research should evaluate the reliability of this finding by using a larger, more diverse sample with greater levels of actual experience of violence.

The subjects' actual experiences with robbery revealed a disproportionate statistic. Out of 86 subjects, there were a total of 73 experiences involving robbery. Further analysis revealed the possibility that robbery, a violent crime, was confused with burglary, a non-violent crime involving the theft of property. It will be necessary for future studies to clarify the distinction between these two crimes so that the statistics are more accurate in the representation of actual experiences.

Neither actual nor virtual experience with violent crime was significantly related to perceptions of crime rates, either generally or specifically on the campus. This seems largely attributable to substantial homogeneity in how all participants perceived the risk of violent crime. Regardless of personal or media exposure to violent crime information, the majority of students perceived violent crime to be quite common.

It may be that the culture is so saturated with messages about the ubiquity of violent crime that differential viewing of particular types of television programs and movies contribute little to people's impressions about crime. This study did not specifically assess exposure to televised news programs; future research might explore whether this source of virtual exposure to crime is influential.

Virtual experience of violent crime was not significantly related to how participants expected they would respond to various threatening situations. High media exposure to violent crime content did not appear to make students more likely to anticipate retaliating or responding in an aggressive manner to threatening encounters.

General impressions about the prevalence of violent crime were also not associated with the tendency to anticipate responding aggressively to threatening situations. This challenges the notion that exaggerated perceptions of risk fuel defensive overreaction.

Because most college students are inundated with an abundance of demands and responsibilities, students may not have the liberty to watch as much television as they once did. It has been stated by numerous researchers that lengthy exposure to television, especially programs that are violent in nature, may affect one's perceptions and cause serious detrimental effects as one gets older. Perhaps assessing whether young adults' current virtual experience has an impact on their perception of the rate of violent crime is misleading because current exposure does not necessarily reflect the amount of violence that they may have once been exposed to. Perhaps the pervasive exaggerated perceptions of the rate of violent crime found here are indeed partially a result of the virtual experiences that these subjects may have encountered at an earlier age while viewing

television, movies, and video games, when such activities were more accessible due to fewer time constraints and responsibilities. Future research using a larger and more heterogeneous sample might permit more sensitive exploration of the hypothesized link between virtual experience of violence and attitudes.

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Survey on Perception and Experience of Violent Crime

The following survey is designed to assess perceptions and experiences involving violent crime. Violent crime refers to aggravated assault (involves a weapon or serious injury), murder, non negligent manslaughter (the willful and non negligent killing of one human being by another), forcible rape, and robbery.

This survey is anonymous, and your responses will be kept strictly confidential. Please answer the following questions as honestly as possible. Thank you for your time.

Please indicate your: Gender: Male_____ Female_____ Age_____ Ethnicity_____

Class: Freshman_____ Sophomore_____ Junior_____ Senior_____

Is your home located in: a large city? _____ a small town?_____ the suburbs?_____ a rural area? _____

Please circle the number that applies to the statements that follow:

	strongly disagree 1	**somewhat disagree 2**	**somewhat agree 3**	**strongly agree 4**
1. Violent crime is out of control in this country.	1	2	3	4
2. Statistics show a decrease in violent crime.	1	2	3	4
3. Violence by urban youth has increased.	1	2	3	4
4. Violence by small town and rural youth has increased.	1	2	3	4
5. The rate of violent crime in rural areas is less than half of what it is in metropolitan areas.	1	2	3	4
6. The rate of murder and non negligent manslaughter in rural areas is less than half of what it is in metropolitan areas.	1	2	3	4
7. The rate of aggravated assault is less than half as much in rural areas as it is in metropolitan areas.	1	2	3	4
8. The rate of robbery is more than ten times higher in metropolitan areas than in rural areas.	1	2	3	4
9. The rate of forcible rape is ten times higher in metropolitan areas than in rural areas.	1	2	3	4
10. Gun control will lower the crime rate.	1	2	3	4

Appendix A

	strongly disagree 1	somewhat disagree 2	somewhat agree 3	strongly agree 4
11. Homicide is one of the top three leading causes of death in America.	1	2	3	4
12. Youth homicide rates have declined over the past 30 years.	1	2	3	4
13. An increase in the number of law enforcement officers is an indication that crime is on the rise.	1	2	3	4
14. Television makes people insensitive to violent crime.	1	2	3	4
15. Television news reports are proof of America's serious crime problem.	1	2	3	4
16. Newspaper and magazine articles are proof of America's serious crime problem.	1	2	3	4
17. Media reports validate fear of crime.	1	2	3	4
18. Violence in movies makes people insensitive to crime.	1	2	3	4
19. Violent urban legends are credible.	1	2	3	4
20. Music CDs desensitize listeners to violent crime.	1	2	3	4
21. Graphic images of victims on the Internet make some people behave violently.	1	2	3	4
22. The Internet provides details about how to commit violent crimes.	1	2	3	4
23. The majority of video games involve some form of violence.	1	2	3	4
24. Playing video games increases the tendency of individuals to act violently.	1	2	3	4
25. I live in an unsafe neighborhood.	1	2	3	4
26. I feel vulnerable to violent crime.	1	2	3	4
27. I feel safe walking in my neighborhood during the day.	1	2	3	4

	strongly disagree 1	somewhat disagree 2	somewhat agree 3	strongly agree 4
28. I feel safe walking in my neighborhood at night.	1	2	3	4
29. I am more likely to be the victim of a violent crime perpetrated by a stranger rather than by someone I know.	1	2	3	4
30. My personal experience is proof of America's serious crime problem.	1	2	3	4
31. It is likely that I will be the victim of a violent crime at some point in my life.	1	2	3	4
32. I would consider purchasing a gun for my own protection if I were ever attacked.	1	2	3	4
33. I frequently worry about being physically attacked.	1	2	3	4
34. I have thought out a plan of defense for dangerous situations in which I may be vulnerable.	1	2	3	4
35. I feel safe in my campus residence.	1	2	3	4
36. I feel safe walking on campus during daylight hours.	1	2	3	4
37. I feel safe walking on campus at night.	1	2	3	4
38. I feel safe at parties on campus.	1	2	3	4
39. I feel safe using campus parking lots during the day.	1	2	3	4
40. I feel safe using campus parking lots at night.	1	2	3	4
41. I have faith in the ability of campus security and college authorities to protect me.	1	2	3	4

Please provide short answers to the following questions about:

1. Statistics

1. In the United States for every 100,000 individuals, how many experience aggravated assault each year?

fewer than 10_____ 35_____ 165_____ 360_____

2. In the United States for every 100,000 individuals, how many experience robbery each year?

fewer than 10_____ 35_____ 165_____ 360_____

3. In the United States for every 100,000 individuals, how many experience forcible rape each year?

fewer than 10_____ 35_____ 165_____ 360_____

4. In the United States for every 100,000 individuals, how many experience murder and non negligent manslaughter each year?

fewer than 10_____ 35_____ 165_____ 360_____

5. What percentage of violent crimes occur at or near the victim's home?

fewer than 10%_____ 30%_____ 70%_____ 90%_____

6. What percentage of violent crimes occur in parking lots and garages?

fewer than 10%_____ 30%_____ 70%_____ 90%_____

7. What percentage of violent crimes occur from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.?

10%_____ 30%_____ 55%_____ 75%_____

8. What percentage of violent crimes occur from 6:00 p.m. to midnight?

10%_____ 30%_____ 55%_____ 75%_____

9. What percentage of violent crimes occur from midnight to 6:00 a.m.?

10%_____ 30%_____ 55%_____ 75%_____

10. In what percentage of violent crimes are no weapons present?

10%_____ 30%_____ 55%_____ 75%_____

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2. Media

1. Approximately how many hours of television do you watch per week? _____ hours

2. What types of shows do you usually watch? (Check all that apply.)

sports_____ drama_____ comedy_____ cartoons_____ game shows_____ crime shows_____

other (please explain)_____

3. What percentage of your information about violent crime do you receive from television? _____%

4. What percentage of your information about violent crime do you receive from newspapers and magazines? _____%

5. How many true crime books have you read in the past two years? _____

6. How often do you frequent web sites like **rotten.com** or **goregallery.com**?

daily_____ a few times a week_____ monthly_____ rarely_____ never_____

3. Actual Experience

1. Have you ever been a victim of violent crime? (Check those that apply.)

aggravated assault_____ murder_____ non negligent manslaughter_____ forcible rape_____ robbery_____ none_____

If checked, briefly describe.

2. Has a member of your immediate family ever been a victim of violent crime? (Check those that apply.)

aggravated assault_____ murder_____ non negligent manslaughter_____ forcible rape_____ robbery_____ none_____

If checked, briefly describe.

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3. Has a member of your extended family ever been a victim of violent crime? (Check those that apply.)

aggravated assault_____ murder_____ non negligent manslaughter_____ forcible rape_____ robbery_____ none_____

If checked, briefly describe.

4. Have any of your close friends ever been the victims of violent crime? (Check those that apply.)

aggravated assault_____ murder_____ non negligent manslaughter_____ forcible rape_____ robbery_____ none_____

If checked, briefly describe.

5. Have any of your acquaintances ever been the victims of violent crime? (Check those that apply.)

aggravated assault_____ murder_____ non negligent manslaughter_____ forcible rape_____ robbery_____ none_____

If checked, briefly describe.

6. Have you ever witnessed a violent crime? (Check those that apply.)

aggravated assault_____ murder_____ non negligent manslaughter_____ forcible rape_____ robbery_____ none_____

If checked, briefly describe.

7. Has anyone attacked or threatened you with any of the following:

gun_____ knife_____ baseball bat_____ scissors_____ stick_____ a thrown object, such as a rock or a bottle_____

other:

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8. Have you ever been:

grabbed_____ punched_____ choked_____ raped_____ sexually attacked_____ threatened face to face_____

9. What measures do you take to prevent yourself from becoming the victim of a violent crime? (Check all that apply.)

walk in groups at night ____ never go to strange places alone_____ carry a cell phone _____
stay in well lit areas at night____ carry mace or pepper spray _____ have training in self defense_____
carry a weapon ____ lock doors/windows _____ alarm your car or house _____
tell people your plans before leaving _____
other:

4. Hypothetical Situations

1. If someone demanded you to surrender your purse or wallet, would you:

drop it and run_____ keep it and run_____ verbally resist_____ physically resist_____

2. What would you do if someone followed you to your car?

drop the keys and run_____ run to the car and lock the doors_____ confront the person verbally_____ attack the person physically_____

3. What would you do if someone threatened your girlfriend/boyfriend in your presence?

run away alone_____ run away together_____ confront the person verbally_____ attack the person physically_____

4. What would you do if you saw a suspicious person in your home or dorm?

leave the premises_____ lock yourself in your room and call authorities_____

confront the person verbally____ attack the person physically_____